

## *Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá*

### *1962–*

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 2001–2005  
POPULAR DEMOCRAT FROM PUERTO RICO

Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá served a single four-year term as Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner, advocating for the island's commonwealth status and its cultural and political autonomy. "I'm going to Washington to reaffirm that we are Puerto Ricans first. I'm going to Washington to defend the sovereignty of the Puerto Rican people," Acevedo-Vilá declared shortly after his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá was born on February 13, 1962, in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico, to state senator Salvador Acevedo and Elba Vilá. He earned a degree in political science from the Universidad de Puerto Rico in 1982 and graduated from its law school three years later. After clerking for the supreme court of Puerto Rico, he moved to the mainland United States, where he earned a masters degree from Harvard Law School in 1987. For the next two years, he clerked for the chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, returning to Puerto Rico in 1989. He married Luisa Gándara, and the couple had two children, Gabriela and Juan Carlos.

Acevedo-Vilá began his career as an aide for Puerto Rican Governor Hernández Colón of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), which he called "the longstanding defender of the commonwealth of Puerto Rico."<sup>2</sup> In 1992 at the age of 30, he won election as a Popular Democrat to the Puerto Rican house of representatives, and after only five years in the insular legislature, he was elevated to minority leader and elected president of the PPD—a major vote of confidence.<sup>3</sup> As party head, Acevedo-Vilá became a leading critic of the island's 1998 status referendum—which had support in the U.S. House of Representatives—complaining that it gave those who favored statehood an unfair advantage. On multiple occasions, Acevedo-Vilá asked Congress to scrap referendum bills H.R. 856 and S. 472, and in 1997 he

argued heatedly with Puerto Rican Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero-Barceló during a House subcommittee hearing on the island's political status.<sup>4</sup> Testifying before the U.S. Senate's Committee on Energy and Natural Resources roughly a year later, Acevedo-Vilá blamed mainland administrators for the island's nebulous federal relationship. "It is not our fault. It was the United States that invaded Puerto Rico. It was Congress that granted U.S. citizenship back in 1917. It was Congress that granted Commonwealth back in 1952," he said. "By harmonizing the fact that we are a people, a Nation, with our own identity, history, and culture, with the preservation of the permanent bond of the U.S. citizenship, Commonwealth represents an alternative to the extremes of complete integration and total separation."<sup>5</sup> In December 1998, much to Acevedo-Vilá's satisfaction, a majority on the island voted in favor of commonwealth status. "This vote," he declared, "means that we have here people who are proud of their history, proud of their relationship with the United States, proud of their American citizenship, but, above all, proud of their Puerto Ricanness."<sup>6</sup>

Not long after the contentious plebiscite debates, Acevedo-Vilá received some unexpected support in the PPD primaries and ran for Resident Commissioner against Romero-Barceló.<sup>7</sup> The earlier status vote had set the stage for the 2000 election, crystallizing the major differences between the island's two main parties. According to the San Juan press, the race was notably "confrontational," with attacks on character, accusations of dirty money, complaints filed with the Federal Election Commission (FEC), and threats of disbarment.<sup>8</sup> Acevedo-Vilá put everything he had and then some into the campaign; by late October, he was nearly half a million dollars in debt and struggling to match the fundraising pace set by Romero-Barceló.<sup>9</sup> In a televised debate days before



the election, Acevedo-Vilá chided the incumbent for his aggressive position on statehood, faulted him for the federal government's military training on the island of Vieques, and accused him of wasting time in Congress.<sup>10</sup> Acevedo-Vilá won the support of powerful labor unions and campaigned on promises to strengthen Puerto Rico's economy, revamp certain environmental regulations, open access to affordable housing, curtail crime, and improve the island's education system.<sup>11</sup> The PPD's frequent charges of corruption against the sitting Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive) administration weighed heavily on the race. Despite early polls that showed him trailing Romero-Barceló, Acevedo-Vilá eventually pulled ahead with a 49.3 percent plurality, besting the incumbent by about 4 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Acevedo-Vilá was sworn in as the 18th Resident Commissioner from Puerto Rico on January 3, 2001. He caucused with the Democrats and was selected by his first-term peers to serve as their vice president. Like those of his predecessors, Acevedo-Vilá's committee assignments gave him a voice in economic and territorial issues before Congress. He served on the Agriculture, Resources, and Small Business Committees and also joined the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, where he chaired the Livable Communities Task Force.<sup>13</sup>

Underlying Acevedo-Vilá's time in the House was an aggressive campaign to change how Congress understood its relationship with Puerto Rico. Romero-Barceló had cast the federal-insular connection as a struggle for equality, but Acevedo-Vilá sought "a fresh start" in which Puerto Rico would lobby for more control over its affairs, almost as if it were a separate nation. The island's press called Acevedo-Vilá's plan "a concept that could run into trouble with federal bureaucrats." "No longer will Puerto Rico be portrayed on Capitol Hill as a politically put-upon colony whose citizens are deprived of full civil rights within the American system," wrote the *Washington* correspondent of the *San Juan Star*.<sup>14</sup>

The first test was Acevedo-Vilá's attempt to convince the navy to cease bombing exercises on the nearby island of Vieques before May 2003, the deadline set by the previous Resident Commissioner and the outgoing William J.

(Bill) Clinton administration.<sup>15</sup> Acevedo-Vilá had been working on the issue for the better part of two years as PPD president, and in 1999, a year before he ran for the U.S. House, Acevedo-Vilá called on the U.S. Senate to withdraw the navy for good. An accident in which a resident of Vieques was killed by a stray bomb sparked new calls for the Defense Department to cede its portion of the island to Puerto Rico. Moreover, the continual bombings were reportedly sickening Vieques' residents and destroying the environment.<sup>16</sup> "It's not a national security issue, it's a health and human-rights issue," Acevedo-Vilá said.<sup>17</sup> Despite the Resident Commissioner's efforts, the U.S. military upheld the original settlement, ceasing all operations on Vieques in spring 2003 before transferring much of the land to the National Wildlife Refuge System.<sup>18</sup>

The situation in Vieques cast a long shadow over Acevedo-Vilá's legislative agenda in the House, which included securing new tax-based incentives for industry seeking to establish roots in Puerto Rico. Many in Washington suspected that Congress would delay any new tax package as long as Puerto Rico pressured the navy to leave Vieques—especially a tax proposal that could easily be construed as "corporate welfare," according to the island's press.<sup>19</sup> But Acevedo-Vilá framed the incentives as a way to create jobs on an island suffering from high unemployment.<sup>20</sup> In a *Washington Times* editorial, he proposed new tax breaks with safeguards to prevent big companies from exploiting possible loopholes, "thereby maximizing the economic benefits of the legislation." Since Puerto Rico was a major consumer of U.S. goods, any policy that benefited the island would also benefit the mainland's economy, Acevedo-Vilá explained, calling his plan "a win-win proposition."<sup>21</sup>

Acevedo-Vilá often emphasized Puerto Rico's unique relationship with the federal government in the hopes of winning more autonomy while seeking equal treatment in relation to the national budget. As the *Washington Post* pointed out in September 2002, he sought leeway to enact independent trade pacts with nearby Caribbean countries, which the PPD hoped would raise much-needed revenue, even as the PPD "also [was] working to achieve

parity with states in federally funded programs, such as nutritional assistance and health care.”<sup>22</sup> In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Acevedo-Vilá worked to improve the services available to veterans on the island, especially at the San Juan VA Medical Center, which had lost many of its resources. He supported amendments to H.R. 1261, the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003, and advocated bolstering Medicare on the island, declaring, “U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico pay the same Federal payroll taxes as any other jurisdiction. They deserve equity.”<sup>23</sup>

Acevedo-Vilá also highlighted Puerto Rico’s environment, introducing a bill in mid-March 2002 to protect a swath of land known as El Yunque, “the only tropical rain forest within the U.S. National Forest System.” Known as the Caribbean National Forest Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 2002 (H.R. 3954)—and based on the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968—the bill provided “maximum protection” for three river systems containing “critical habitat for endangered species and sensitive tropical plant species.” As Acevedo-Vilá noted during its consideration that May, his measure insulated the designated rivers from future commercial development. The bill was reported favorably out of the Resources Committee and passed the House by voice vote on May 7th. The measure was approved by the Senate in the fall and was signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 19, 2002.<sup>24</sup>

Midway through his four-year term, Acevedo-Vilá announced he would not seek re-election to the House.<sup>25</sup> Opting instead to run for governor of Puerto Rico, he won the PPD’s nomination and prevailed in the general election in fall 2004 by a razor-thin margin. After a lengthy legal battle, with multiple appeals and overturned rulings, the federal courts declared Acevedo-Vilá the victor by about 0.2 percent, or approximately 3,500 of the nearly two million votes cast.<sup>26</sup> As governor, he continued to oppose calls for statehood and supported efforts in the U.S. Congress proposing a new Puerto Rican constitutional convention. Facing mounting budget deficits, Acevedo-Vilá fought with the Nuevo Progresista-controlled house over a loan to keep the government operational, only to see part of the insular government shut down in May 2006.<sup>27</sup>

In 2008 Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño of the Partido Nuevo Progresista challenged Acevedo-Vilá in the gubernatorial election. From the start, Acevedo-Vilá’s re-election prospects were weakened by the controversial race four years earlier, the government shutdown, and the resulting financial difficulties. Worse, federal authorities indicted him on multiple counts of fraud, along with a handful of other charges, in what the *New York Times* described as “an elaborate scheme to pay off more than \$500,000 in campaign debts” dating to his time as Resident Commissioner.<sup>28</sup> The prosecution denied any underlying motivation, but Acevedo-Vilá remained convinced that the case was politically motivated—a “spectacle designed to harm me.” Acevedo-Vilá lost the gubernatorial election that fall. He was eventually acquitted of all the charges.<sup>29</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

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## NOTES

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  - 10 Eva Llorens Velez, "Jabs on Vieques, Status Dominate Debate," 30 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 8.
  - 11 "Campaign Briefs: Acevedo-Vilá Gets Union Backing," 25 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 15; "Campaign Briefs: Acevedo-Vilá: Less U.S. Control," 3 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6; "Campaign Briefs: Acevedo Unveils Environment Plan," 16 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6; "Hopefuls for D.C. Post Debate Vieques, Status," 20 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 12; "Campaign Briefs: Acevedo-Vilá Plan Is Also on Internet," 13 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6; "Campaign Briefs: Acevedo Unveils Environment Plan," 16 October 2000, *San Juan Star*: 6.
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